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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the application of a risk-based decision-making process in education and the use of risk communication with special education students and their parents. Risk-based decision making clarifies uncertainties inherent in a decision by examining the probability of a resulting harmful effect and the consequences of decisions made. Risk communication is aimed at reducing student chances for being at risk and increasing opportunities for educational success. Risk-based decision making can be applied to education through the formulation of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which involves: (1) referring students with learning, emotional, or physical disabilities, or other impediments to learning; (2) student evaluation by one or more professionals to determine the extent of the problem; (3) determining possible outcomes if the student continues without intervention; (4) evaluating and selecting risk-reducing alternatives; (5) implementing actions that manage and reduce risks and improve the chances for student success; and (6) communication of risk analysis information between analyzers and students and parents. To be successful, risk communication must address psychological, socioeconomic, and cultural factors that influence the perceptions of students and parents. Improving risk communication during an IEP conference involves imparting information clearly and with compassion, using nonthreatening body language, making parents equal partners in the education of students, and evaluating the success of communication by measuring parent satisfaction. (Contains three references.) (LP)

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RISK COMMUNICATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Risk based decision-making is intended to clarify the significance of uncertainties inherent in the decision (Keeney, 1993). Risk includes both a probability of a resulting harmful event and the consequence(s) of the decisions made. Why is there concern about risk in special education? Who needs to be concerned about communicating risk to students, parents, other teachers, administrators and the community? Should teachers and other educational professionals be concerned about risk? Communication with parents of special education students is an important part of the role of school administrators and special education teachers. Risk communication is part of the process aimed at reducing the student's chances being at risk and enhancing the student's opportunities for a successful educational experience. There is a fairly large body of literature about risk and risk communication, little if any of which has been communicated to educators. This paper informs special education professionals about the use of risk based decision-making principles in the educational process.

Research involving risk is conducted in many disciplines. Insurance companies communicate about weight, blood pressure, driving record and other factors which will influence your premiums. Environmental scientists, look at risk and risk communication about hazardous chemicals, waste dumps and their impact on the public (Cohrssen and Covello, 1989). Medical professionals inform patients of the risk of livestyle habits that can inpact their health. In almost all disciplines, there is a need for risk communication.

Risk communication involves a variety of people. Dealing with children in special education placements there are a variety of stakeholders (those who have an interest in and/or are affected by the outcomes). These stakeholders include the student, the parent(s), other members of the student's family, regular and special teachers, administrators, the public and for students in transition programs and beyond, employers. Obviously the needs and goals of this disparate group will be somewhat different. The first thing you should recognize is that stakeholders have different interests, roles, and perceptions of appropriate outcomes.

THE RISK BASED DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The overall process of risk based decision-making involves several steps: hazard identification, hazard assessment, risk assessment, risk management, risk analysis and risk communication. Looking at the steps individually aids in adapting them to education.

Hazard identification involves identifying possible hazards. In educational scenes, hazards may be learning, emotional, or physical disabilities or other impediments to learning. In schools, hazard identification starts with the referral process. A student exhibits a problem which the

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regular teacher cannot adapt instruction to correct without additional support or assistance. Hazard assessment involves measurement of the hazards, i.e. student evaluation by one or more professionals to determine the cause and/or extent of the problem. In the hazard assessment step, a great deal of technical data are usually gathered about the individual.

Risk assessment is an quantative estimation of the effects and the probabilities of uncertain outcomes resulting from the identified hazards. This step looks at what will happen if the risks are not abated, i.e., if the student continues in a normal regime without intervention.
Risk management involves the evaluation and selection of risk reducing alternatives. The previously identified hazards are managed to reduce or eliminate possible risks and their subsequent effects. For example, a classroom teacher may move to adaptive instruction rather than traditional instruction to reduce the risk of a student's failure and dropping out of school.
Risk analysis combines the risk assessment and risk management process. This step determines the possible plans that can be implemented to manage and reduce the hazards or risks to produce the least harmful effects i.e. what can be done to improve the chances of the student's success.

Finally, risk communication is the exchange of risk analysis information between the the analyzers and other stakeholders. Risk communication is the process of informing the stakeholders, and hopefully coming to a consensus, such as an IEP. Educational professionals and other stakeholders, such as students and parents, share information and decide on a course of action. The format, mechanism, and success of risk communication meetings have a direct impact on the effectiveness of the meeting, the goodwill and cooperation of the parents, and the ultimate success of the student and parent-student-teacher realtionships. Hence, effective communication at this point is vital. The decisions to be made are based on analysis of a great deal of technical data which in many cases overwhelm some of the stakeholders. Special educators, therefore, face the same problem as other disciplines involved with relaying technical information to lay receivers. The lay people are often the major stakeholders and must make difficult, complex, and often far-reaching decisions based on the technical information presented to them by the "special education experts".

An example of the risk based decision making process in education is the IEP process. Hazards (learning impediments) are usually identified by the classroom teacher or parent and measured by school psychologists or other related professionals. The risk assessment and risk management of the perceived hazards are done by the IEP team when they collectively pool their knowledge and form an anlysis or plan (risk analysis) for an effective program for the student. The team communicates to the parents (and student) the students' special needs are and the alternatives available to them to reduce the hazards (or risks) that may occur in the educational process. Other types of situations which involve risk analysis and communication for special educators include child find programs, transition programs (communicating risks to both employers and to students), advisement of students' course/program selection (life skills verses academics), communication with adminstrators relative to student problems, communication with medical personnel related to medication and other treatments and the like.

RISK COMMUNICATION FACTORS
Stakeholders all receive the same data but may interpret them differently according to their

culture, socio-economic status, educational level, religious beliefs, perception of the risks involved, personal values and other factors. These influencin g factors seem to fall into two basic categories: psychological and socio-economic/cultural and must be considered and addressed for successful communication.

Psychological factors include outrage, anger, helplessness, and the stakeholders' perception of the hazards' effects, and the truthfulness of the communicators. These factors are generally related to one another and may be due to ineffective communication. Outrage is felt when unexpected events occur. Stakeholders feel outrage when they view a risk as more than a probability of something happening. They feel helpless when they seem to have no input or control. Anger occurs for a variety of reasons.

Socio-economic/cultural factors are based on stakeholders' family and experiences which combine with their values to form their perceptions as to what is or has taken place. Knowledge is socially constructed and different people will construct it differentially. We know from other literatures that minorities and the poor feel increased vulnerability when risk is communicated to them. They tend to believe that they can have little impact on the system and that they have been disenfranchised. This is probably true in the educational arena as well. They tend to have different cultures and different values from teachers and therefore they probably will respond differentially to proposed interventions. We need to know the cultures and values of those with whon we communicate if we are to communicate effectively. The options offered, the relevance of the consequences, how we value the consequences and the likelihood that we think the consequences will take place all impact our perception of the risk. The choices offered are perceived differently by stakeholders with different cultural, moral and educational values. Because of these different interests and goals, stakeholders may or may not wish to hear the message(s) which is brought to them. Parents and students are distrustful of communicators who tell them bad news or that they can't do something. Many students and parents perceive that the interactions and feelings between home and school are poor. The same may be said about the relationship between special education teachers and regular teachers/ administrators in many districts. Truth, to many, is relative, and varies depending on the background of the hearer. We tend to avoid information which is too discrepant with our beliefs (Festinger, 1957). Finally, reactance theory indicates that if we reduce a person's perceived degrees of freedom to make choices this will promote resistance.

The risk communication literature for physicians holds information which should inform our dealings with students and parents. The typical client for a doctor should respond in similar ways to the client of a special education teacher who is trying to correct or support a student problem. Here we find that the typical client feels that insufficient time is spent with them, that they are deserted in their time of need. They are ignored, rushed and generally not talked to. The explanations that they get are inadequate, possibly because they cannot understand (what is seen as an excessive use of jargon). When clients voice their feelings their views are undervalued, and, they feel, unrespected. The practitioners fail to understand the clients' perspective. Annecdotal evidence suggent that this may be true in special education as well.

IMPROVING RISK COMMUNICATION

How do we communicate the risk assessment and the management of the risks to minimize the hazards involved to keep a student from becoming "at risk"? Most would argue that some have problems in communication and building consensus, but can this new direction, risk communication, offer any solutions? Some of the principles used by risk communicators may be of use to special education teachers and administrators. These principles would start with good communication. When you want to tell others about a risk do so clearly and with compassion. Remember that, at least initially, they may feel threatened if they do not trust school personnel. Always use non-threatening body language and try not to overwhelm them with experts. Think of what this means for the typical first IEP meeting with one parent and ten school experts. Try to deal with clients as if they are partners in the business of promoting the education of their students, for surely they are. If clients work with you they are much more helpful than if they disengage or actively oppose what you are trying to do. Finally, plan to evaluate your communication performance you need to measure the success of your communication by measuring client satisfaction. If the client is not satisfied you will build an enemy rather than a partner in solving a child's problem. This may be the most important idea that we can share with you, this idea of client satisfaction evaluation. If your clients are satisfied they will work for you to get money and materials. They will go to the school board and they will help you in any way that they can. If they are dissatisfied they will also go to the school board.

The outrage caused by the risk can be mollified when the stakeholders are well informed and their input is an integral part of the decision making process. Successful, effective risk communication minimizes outrage, anger and helplessness and maximizes responsible and informed decision-making among the stakeholders. Stakeholders' perceptions of the hazards and their effects are based on experience. Education is often the key to changing this factor.

Trust is a prominent issue in the communication process. If the commuicators are not truthful, many other factors can come into play. If clients do not trust you why should they believe anything that you say, or support any thing that you do? Therefore, you must help them generate trust. Trust is generated when you are open, honest and promote full disclosure. If you always tell it all, and they listen to you, you will engender trust. Unfortunately, many times we are not in on the beginning of the relationship, and trust has to be rebuilt. To rebuild trust you must start with a trained communicator. Do not believe that you can be effective if talking to parents without additional training

Risk communication in other areas informs us that we will increase anger on the part of those we communicate with if we raise their costs, try to change their opinions, talk down to them, ignore their feelings (or label them as irrational), don't follow up or through on things we say that we will do and change the rules in the middle of the game. Think of these things when you are involved in IEP meetings, school board hearings, or when you talk to parents. Presently there is a lack of knowledge of the application of the risk analysis/communication process in special education, but some things are known from related disciplines.

You must explore with clients where they are personally and culturally so that you can determine which messages they will not reject out of hand. You must be proactive. Almost all problems can be dealt with if you catch them early, before they have had a chance to blow up into big

problems. You must be open and share what you know in ways that parents and their children can understand. If there have been problems in the past do not try to put the blame on the parent or the child. Usually the school has at least some responsibility for the school related problems that a child exhibits. You need to emphasize the positive. What are the good things that you are going to try to do? What will the desired outcomes be and how will you be able to show the parent how the child has progressed from the time you set the goals till the next evaluation? Note that you lose trust if most of the goals you help to set are not accomplished. Note, also, that even if you are not responsible for the instruction, you, as the special education teacher, will be perceived as responsible unless all of the regular education teachers are at the IEP conference. Finally you need to insure that there is a flow of communication between you and the parent and child. If you have open, trusting, two-way communication problem solving is possible.

Evaluation is extremely important as part of the risk communication process. If you wish to reduce outrage, you must know which stakeholders you are communicating with appropriately and which are not getting the message. Evaluation necessitates gathering data from all stakeholders. Satisfaction surveys should be created for and collected from parents, students, regular teachers and others to whom services are provided. The assessment should attempt to determine the level of satisfaction of the services provided. From more distant publics such as employers, legislators and the general public, you need to provide opportunities where they can voice their perceptions of problems. This may be as technically sophisticated as a chat room on your PC network or as simple as a public forum or employer's day at your local highschool.

CONCLUSIONS

The risk communication literature has provided a new framework with which to view the interaction process between stakeholders in the special education setting. We need to evaluate the techniques from other disciplines to insure that they transfer directly into special education. Research in this area may prove extremely valuable in extending our knowledge. Much of what we do in interaction with parents deals with risk and risk communication, therefore we should use the established methodologies in this process. Successful communication among stakeholders should mitigate outrage and anger while fostering trust. Communication is our most important process and if we do it well we will have parental helpers and supporters. If we do it poorly, or not at all, we fail and have parents and students lined up against us and place the students at greater risk of educational failure. Students should not fail or be at risk due to our failure to communicate risk effectively.

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